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► To cite this version:

Jacqueline de Bony. Dutch decision as rooted in Dutch culture: An ethnologic study of the Dutch decision process. 21th EGOS Colloquium, Jun 2005, Berlin, Germany. halshs-00113147

HAL Id: halshs-00113147

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00113147>

Submitted on 10 Nov 2006

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21st EGOS Colloquium, Berlin June 30-July 2, 2005

Decision making in Organizations: Unlocking the potential

**Dutch decision as rooted in Dutch culture :
An ethnologic study of the Dutch decision process**

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Summary

Consensus is a mode of regulation well adapted to globalisation as it provides a means to reach agreements and manage diversity at the same time. However, is it a universal decision mode? This study explores the co-existence of individualism and collectivism in Dutch consensus. A descriptive and interpretive analysis of the Dutch decision process allows to disentangle the mechanism by which individual autonomy and cooperation articulate. This mechanism is assisted by a series of social devices that are described and discussed as deeply rooted in Dutch society. Viewed from a French perspective, consensus reveals a number of obstacles and a totally different patterns of collective representations. Consequences for intercultural management are stressed.

Key words

Individual autonomy, cooperation, coexistence individualism/collectivism, Dutch consensus, Dutch decision process, French decision, articulation individual/collective

Introduction

In recent years, studies of decision making have witnessed an increasing sophistication in modeling decisions situations (Shapira, 1997; Schneider & Shanteau, 2003). Approaches which take into account the complexities and realities of the decision situation have targeted a number of contested issues. Is the decision choice-based or rule-based? Is it an instrumental or an interpretive activity? Is it a clear and consistent activity or is it rather ambiguous and equivocal? Are the deciders independent and autonomous individuals or are they deciding within a frame of an interacting ecology of systemic properties (March 1997)?

Rational theories consider decision as an instrumental activity that resolves choices (Harvard Business Review, 2002). It is the result of information, comparison, optimization and risk evaluation of the selected solution together with an evaluation of all potential alternatives (Shoemaker, 1982). It reflects “how decision should be” in an ideally rational model. In this narrow sense, decision is taken “in isolation”, i.e. detached from any social interactions and context.

Decision is more thoroughly described as a social situation that involves, in addition to its substance, the actors and their contexts (Peterson et al, 2003, Argyris, 2002; Beach, 1997; Sfez, 1992, 2004). Far from an individual activity, it is influenced by many factors such as procedures, rules, norms, constraints and relations which are collectively settled and followed (Zhou, 1997). The decision process is embedded in a socially constructed reality that includes organizational, institutional and cultural levels. In this broad sense, decision making is better undertaken with a variety of complementary approaches such as decision as rules based actions, decision making as sense making, decision as an equivocal situation or decision making ecologies (Shapira, 1997).

The relation between the individual and the group is rarely investigated in such a way even though it lies at the core of any social situations. During the decision, an individual is caught in a permanent movement between assimilation and differentiation. This happens for example when a procedure, a rule, or a norm are followed. The tension between conformity and autonomy becomes a crucial issue when the decision takes place in a group such as in a concerted or consensual decision.

This paper explores the cultural rooting of Dutch consensus. It uses the decision process as a tool to emphasize the relation between the individual and the group in Dutch consensus. The research targets the mechanism by which a collection of individual opinions converges towards a single collective decision. The document begins with two short analyses on individualism and collectivism and on Dutch decision (section 1). Then, the research method, which combines a descriptive and interpretative approach, is presented (section 2). The next section describes the decision meeting by means of its procedures, rules and norms and the relevant aspects of its unfolding (section 3). The text stresses a series of social devices that condition the support to the decision (section 4). In the following section, a series of interviews are interpreted. The meaning that the actors give to consultation and decision is emphasized (section 5). The articulation between individual autonomy and cooperation is revealed and discussed from an insider's and outsider's perspectives altogether (section 6). The paper further evaluates the capacities of ethnographic methods to examine the relation between the individual and the group and its cultural variation.

1- Individualism, collectivism and Dutch decision

Individualism and collectivism have been essentially investigated in the cross cultural studies (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 1994, 2001; Schwartz, 1990, 1994, 1999; Triandis, 1995, 2001; Ingelhart, 1997). The amount of publications is in deep contrast with the limitations of their theoretical and methodological backgrounds. Two conceptual and experimental biases result in ignoring or canceling (by averaging) the relation between the individual and the group. First, individualism and collectivism (or their sub-divisions) are considered as polar opposites (what is individualist is, per se, not collectivist) or as independent (orthogonal) dimensions (Oyserman et al, 2002; Berry et al, 2002). Thus, it is meaningless to consider their relations. Second, the choice for a quantitative analysis implicates that the factors are invariant in nature and change exclusively in intensity. The

corresponding experimental construct randomizes the specificities which are precisely at stake. These peculiarities are emphasized by using ethnographic approaches and thick description of the situation under scrutiny (Geertz, 1973,1996; Chapman, 1997; d'Iribarne, 1989, 1998, 2004) .

The literature about Dutch society, stresses individualism and consensus but usually fails to put these two characters into perspective.

A first line of research focus on Dutch consensus (Benders et al, 2000; Noorderhaven, 2002). Consensus is described in terms such as consultation, cooperation and compromise (Van Iterson, 2000). Consensus is associated with a Dutch aversion towards a centralized power and a strong preference for collective management (Papenheim, 1997). The studies also mention Dutch inclination for egalitarianism (Vossestein, 1998) and a peculiar attention towards minorities (Lijphart, 1968). Sometimes, consensus is considered in association with pragmatism (de Voogd, 1992) and sociability (Driessen, 1997).

Another line of research emphasizes Dutch individualism. Already noticed by Ruth Benedict (in Van Ginkel, 1997) during the war, it has been revealed by the cross cultural studies (Hofstede, 1980). The form of Dutch individualism has been characterized as an individualization of the decision power and responsibilities (d'Iribarne, 1989, Keizer, 2000). It is also associated with a strong defense of the individual towards pressures and sanctions (d'Iribarne, 1989).

A paradoxical coexistence of individual autonomy and submission to the group has been observed more than twenty years ago (d'Iribarne, 1989). This paradox, is confirmed by the Dutch (Keizer, 2000; Noorderhaven, 2002) and has been reformulated in terms of a "socialization of individualism" (Hampten-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993). Since then, the coexistence of individualism and collectivism in Dutch culture has not been further investigated.

There are, per se, no published studies about the cultural rooting of the Dutch decision process. The "Dutch" specific character of the decision is often evoked in the general literature (Shetter, 1997; van der Horst, 2001). It pinpoints the decision meeting as a Dutch hobby, emphasizes the amount of time spent in meetings, their formal character and the compulsory aspect of the decision. The Dutch literature about decision is not often aware or concerned about its Dutch specific character (Mastenbroek, 1998; Piet, 1990; van Koolwijk, 1997). However, we get the benefit of one managerial (Van Lente, 1997) and two academic studies (Huisman, 2000, 2001; van Vree, 1999, 2001) about the decision meetings. The seminal research of Lijphart (1968) "The politics of accommodations" is also integrated in this study.

2- Research method

This ethnographic research is descriptive and interpretative. It takes the benefit of ten years of integration in the Dutch society. This privileged position as an insider observer allows to navigate back and forth between facts and interpretations with a permanent

control for consistency and to integrate the context of meaning and the context of action associated with the decision situation.

The descriptive work on the decision process is based the author's participation or/and observation of decision meetings in institutions (universities) and associations (professional and benevolent associations), a detailed analysis of documents (report sheets, minutes, decision reports) and a review of Dutch managerial literature about the decision process. The description of the Dutch decision process has been controlled for accuracy by Dutch actors and specialists of the decision.

The interpretative work is based on a series of more than 30 interviews about Dutch decision. The interviewees cover a variety of positions in Dutch corporations (Phillips, Heineken, C&A, etc..) or Dutch subsidiaries of French companies (Chanel, Usinor, France télécom). A number of interviews are undertaken in other professional sector such as justice, education, civil servants, police, research etc.. Several interviewees with a cross-cultural experience (Dutch working in a French company or vice versa) proved very informative and were questioned again in a recurrent way for an in-depth interpretation.

The symbolic meaning of a narrative is not directly accessible. The interpretative work aims at uncovering the symbolic categories and inherent specific partition of the reality. The work takes place on a fully and accurately transcribed interview. It consists in picking in the text recurrent words and terms which reflect the symbolic dimension of the discourse. Attention is drawn on associations and oppositions between these words and underlying ideas. Of importance is the legitimatizations given to these associations and oppositions. An inductive pathway is followed that progressively reveals these symbolic categories and the corresponding partition of the reality (d'Iribarne et al, 1998).

This work takes the benefit of three previous research undertaken within Gestion et Société respectively about consensus in the Netherlands (d'Iribarne, 1989), decision process in Sweden and in France (d'Iribarne et al, 1998) and consensus in multicultural teams (Chevrier, 2000). An independent but complementary study about the transmission of consensus at Dutch elementary school (de Bony, 2003) reinforces the results. The work is accompanied by a search in literature about Dutch socialization of children (Barrit, 1996; Blom, 1995) Dutch society (Schama, 1991, Schuyt and Taverne, 2000; van Ginkel, 1999; Hondius, 1999) and Dutch consensus (de Beer & al, 2002) .

The research is also complemented by a bibliographical review with an objective to put into perspective complementary aspects and domains. For example we have crossed some literature on cooperation (Chen et al, 1998), team working (Cohen and Bailey, 1997) conflict (Miyahara, 1998; Mastenbroek, 1998), together with individualism and collectivism in various countries (Wheeler et al, 1989; Lin and Fu, 1990). We also make use of general bibliography such as culture (Cray and Mallory, 1998) politics (Mac Clelland, 2000) Dutch history (Frijhoff en Spies, 1999; Fokkema and Grijzenhout, 2001) and religion (Weber, 1964) or social sciences (Butler, 1997, Chanlat, 1998) and management (Soderberg and Holden, 2002).

3- Dutch decision meeting

3-1 Presentation of the decision

For sake of clarity, the perception of the decision should already be addressed here. In the Netherlands, a majority vote is not appreciated because it seems too selective (Zelko, 1969). A Dutch individual does not perceive decision as a majority simply outvoting a minority. It is rather considered as a collective trajectory that aims at reaching a federative solution. Consequently, when several individuals are concerned by a common question, a meeting is being called and a decision process is initiated. The final decision is reached after several meetings and informal consultations. In this process, the “vergadering” or decision meeting occupies a central position.

Dutch managerial literature (van Lente, 1997) describes the decision process with a series of steps: orientation, gathering of opinions, elaboration of the decision and evaluation. This literature emphasizes the collective character of the process. However, it does not reveal the mechanism by which individual positions converge towards a single decision, not to speak about the collective representations that allows and drives this convergence.

3-2 The rules of the game

The “vergadering” is a current situation which follows according to an almost identical procedure in a corporation an institution or even a benevolent organization. It is characterized by:

- a defined hierarchical structure with a president and a secretary
- a detailed and sequenced agenda distributed in advance and carefully followed
- a written report of the meeting with the agreed action points and their individual attribution

The “vergadering” unfolds according to a series of norms:

- a tacit agreement of the participants to agree to the future decision
- an interruption of the process in case of disagreement or unexpected event
- the right of the president to exert his hierarchical power over the participants in case of disagreement or obstacles

3-3 The process: routines and customs

It is not easy to depict a typical “vergadering” because each meeting has its own character. However, one can notice a number of routines or customs that give some information about the perception of the individual, the group and their interactions.

The first outstanding aspect is the spatial organization: all individuals face to one another and the meeting room is usually equipped with a table specially devised for this purpose. At the beginning of the meeting, the president formulates the name and reasons of the excused participants in a sort of ritual. He recalls the action points of the previous meeting and controls that they still drive unanimity. Then, he reads the first point of the agenda. Each participant in turn can express his position on the question while the group listen without interruption. At regular intervals, the president summarizes what has been said and makes a synthesis when necessary. He gives the floor to participants in turns and is allowed to stop someone who is monopolizing the discussion or jamming the process.

In case of disagreement or when the process is bogged, the president postpones the meeting to a later date. Depending on the situation, a period of individual reflection is judged sufficient or a commission is designed to solve the problem. When an unexpected event takes place in the discussion, its object is immediately delayed to a later meeting. In a normal process, step by step the viewpoints come closer and a common line is elaborated (sometimes with some negotiations of individual positions). This leads to the formulation of action points which are individually attributed to the concerned participants.

3-4 Few questions

Viewed as a social situation that aims at reaching agreements, the decision meeting brings out several questions. One concerns the president and the hierarchy. What is the need of a president in a collegial decision?

Another question turns around the actor's participation to the decision. Why should everyone attend the meeting? What means this ritual about the excused participants?

The third one concern the process itself. Why is the agenda so strictly defined? Why is the process unable to handle unexpected situations and spontaneity? Why is it interrupted in case of disagreement?

The role of the president deserves some clarification. In the meeting, he is in charge of the quality of the process exclusively. He ensures that each concerned person has the occasion to give her opinion. He promotes the atmosphere of confidence and cohesion needed to reach consensus. In other words, he manages to conciliate the individual and the group. Considering the decision itself, the president has an equal decisional power as any other participant in the meeting. But since, usually, the president is also the head of the group, he is torn between his responsibility for the team as a leader and his equal position towards the decision.

4- Social devices associated to the decision

The strict character of the Dutch decision suggest the presence of a difficulty. The process is assisted by a series of social devices which make the construction of consensus easier. Some of them have been previously emphasized in a different but related situation.

In the "the politics of accommodation", Lijphart (1968) analyses the societal behaviour during Dutch pillarization (1880-1965), a period known for its strict social fragmentation along political and religious lines. A peculiarity associated with this period remains the type of agreements between the elites of the groups. Their cooperation was based on "a pragmatic acceptance of ideological differences". The various political and religious ideologies were equally considered and accepted as settled realities that had not to be questioned. Discussions between the leaders were based exclusively on cohesive elements that avoided all antagonist forces. Decisions were reached by means of "fair compromises" and pragmatic agreements. Then, they were easily imposed on the groups that received the decisions with "deference".

The right to disagree, absence of debate, ideological egalitarianism and pragmatism made these agreements feasible while conformism facilitated their implementation in the groups. The Dutch contemporary decision situation makes use of similar devices and mechanisms to reach agreements. More generally, the consequence of pillarization on today's functioning of Dutch society still remains in question (Wintle, 2000; Blom and Talsma, 2000).

4-1 Right to disagree, egalitarianism and absence of debate

Van den Horst (2001) describes the right to disagree in a decision meeting:

"If someone strongly opposes what has been agreed by the meeting, he or she will ask that this be recorded in the minutes. It will have no effect on the implementation of the decision and, in many cases, those who opposed to the motion will contribute loyally to carrying it out. After all, they lost democratically and everyone knows how they stand (p. 151)". An individual has the right to disagree with the decision. Someone in disagreement can accept and implement the decision without feeling a tension between his own position and that of the group. This social device prevents him to jam the process.

Dutch decision is grounded on a principle of equality between the parties and their viewpoints. One interviewee comment the respect of this principle as follows:

"We have many ideas and conceptions, we want them all to have the same value". It is usually associated with a negative attitude towards persuasion. The same interviewee further comments: *"We do not want others to try to convince us, neither do we want to convince them. When we feel that someone is trying to convince us, we will also try to convince him, leading to a downward spiral which is precisely what we wanted to avoid".* Here, convincing is associated to a downward spiral, something to be avoided. Persuasion has a negative connotation, on the contrary, one should *"live someone's values up to him"*.

In this perception, all opinions are equal, an individual is respected in his own values and he has the right to disagree. This association of devices allows the process to unfold and the decision to be reached without making use of the debate. In other words, this combination of egalitarianism, right to disagree and no persuasion correspond to an avoidance of debate. In this regard, an interviewee says: *"the participants do not like the confrontation of ideas, not at all, this is immediately avoided"*. From the perspective of the actor, the right to disagree and the absence of debate allow an individual to separate his position from that of the group. Egalitarianism and refusal for persuasion reinforce this distinction.

4-2 Sociability, conformism, objectivity and emotional control

The construction of consensus requires a peculiar sphere that is expressed in the non translatable term *"gezelligheid"*. It correspond to a certain form of sociability, a certain behaviour of the individuals in the group and, for the specialists, it is an ethos (Driessen, 1997). *"Gezelligheid"* is called when an individual who disagree faces a dilemma between defending his position or maintaining a positive sphere in the group. In this situation, sociability impose the priority of the relationship between the people over the message to be transmitted.

This demand of sociability is reinforced by conformism that is also imposed by the group. As indicated by Shetter (1997): *“High value is placed on group solidarity, and social conformity is imposed not from above but within the group itself”*.

The communication style in the Dutch professional sphere is commented by Vossestein (1998): *“They talk about it long and thoroughly, possibly intensely, but rarely with dramatic gestures or very loud voices. Such drama would undermine the speaker’s point of view, rather than strengthen it. Not too many emotions, please and no superlatives”*.

In the Netherlands, topics are discussed objectively. In this context, objectivity opposes to subjectivity, facts are detached from the person: *“It is the argument itself that matters, not the manner in which it is presented. Everyone tries to make it clear that it is the issue under discussion which is at stake and not the persons involved (Van der Horst, 2001)”*.

This strive for objectivity oblige the individual to take a distance from his emotions: *“there is no room for strong emotions”*. Expression of emotions is censured above all in case of opposition: *“open displays of opposition, are perfectly licit in the Netherlands on the condition they are free from any verbal violence and thus viewed as suppressing their accompanying emotional charge (d’Iribarne 1989)”*. The author pinpoints the consequences of these restrictive rules: *“So, it is easy to see that there are subjects that is better to avoid discussing, even with the intention of dealing with them objectively”*.

Sociability and conformism contribute to draw individual opinions closer together and converge. Objectivity and emotional control oblige a person to distance herself from her subjectivity.

Altogether, these social devices allows to disagree on the decision, to let it proceed and to keep an individual autonomous opinion. In addition, they allow to implement the decision while being in agreement with oneself and with the group.

5-Perception of the decision by its actors

5-1 Consultation: register of the person and her words

When they talk about the decision, the interviewees first mention the consultation and give it a great importance: *“Before a decision is taken, each individual has the right to express himself.// Each person expresses himself, each person is listened to, it is deeply rooted in the culture”*.

During consultation, opinions are freely expressed. Interviewees talk about : *“discussing freely a subject, expressing oneself without hesitation, in a direct way, having the opportunity to express oneself”*. This freedom in individual expression can go as far as: *“someone has even the possibility to talk nonsense”*.

An opinion is strictly individual. A person can express a totally different position without any precautions: *“If someone has a completely different opinion, he will express it directly, without any twists and turns, without any verbal precautions”*.

Expressing an opposing opinion is not damaging the regard participants have for each other: *“expressing an opposing viewpoint does not suggest being negative about a person. Indeed, one can give a different opinion without the other feeling concerned”*.

The degree of attention given by the group to an individual who expresses his opinion does not depend on the quality of the opinion . As remarked by an interviewee : *“in some meetings, one can observe that those with a minority viewpoint have lots of time to talk, but that does not imply that the minority will..., it is a way to please them”*.

During the consultation, what an individual expresses is a personal opinion. An opinion engages only the person who gives it. It is to be respected as an individual attribute, it is not restricted by other opinions which are also respected accordingly. This gives to a Dutch opinion a highly individual character.

Listening to a person goes further than listening to her opinion. It is also reflected in giving her time and consideration. Consultation expresses the respect given by the group to each individual. Beyond the quality of emitted opinions, Consultation symbolizes the respect of the person and his or her words by the group.

5-2 Decision: register of interest and things

The interviewees always associate the decision and the group and frequently refer to its collective character: *“Decision correspond to the research of a common understanding of a problem.//. It is the decision of the group, the group makes the decision”*.

This collective orientation of the decision is grounded on the conviction that a group decision has a better quality than that of an individual: *“there are more ideas in ten heads than in one”*. This conviction is the driving force of the convergence of opinions.

Indeed, instead of trying to defend his own viewpoint, each individual is naturally inclined to find a common direction and adjust around it: *“The objective of a decision meeting is not to impose one’s own idea, it is to find an idea which will be federative”*.

The actors of the decision will be all the most ready to put their position into perspective when they have been previously heard: *“When someone is informed in the context of his interest, when he has been able to give his viewpoint and advice that have been seriously considered, he will accept when the decision is not in his favour”*.

When they comment the decision the interviewees underline the necessity to get to a result. They say: *“the decision has to be made; the meeting has to be finalized; the decision needs to be expressed”*. And in order to reach the decision, an individuals is ready for compromises: *“We want to get a result, we compromise in order to get to a result”*. He is willing to accept a fair decision in which everyone has his bit: *“Everyone should recognise a little bit of himself in the decision”*.

Dutch decision is essentially pragmatic. It traduces into pragmatic agreements in the form of action points. As remarked by an interviewee: *“Action points are there to guarantee their implementation; a character of the Dutch culture is a great deal of pragmatism. We don’t like general ideas”*. The agreements focus on concrete actions and not on the underlying principles.

During the decisional step, the individual put his own position into perspective and participate actively in the elaboration of a common direction. He has been respected by the group during the consultation and is now ready to compromise. The achievement of the decision self is based on the overriding importance of getting to a concrete result. This interest in pragmatic achievements drives the actors to compromising and reaching a collective solution. In this context of interpretation, the decision step traduces a collective interest for concrete realizations.

According to the actor's perception, consultation symbolizes the respect of the person and her words and decision traduces a collective interest for things. Since these two registers are independent, consultation and decision do not appear as connected at the interpretative level. This symbolic independence allows an individual to implement a decision while remaining totally autonomous in his opinion.

5-3 The connection between consultation and decision

Consultation is not only limited to the gathering of viewpoints and the respect of the group for the individuals. It also correspond to a personal implication in the future decision. Some interviewees express their feeling about a need or a duty to give one's opinion: *"Everyone can express, must express I would say because those who do not express have a problem"* or *"We must always give our opinion, we have the feeling that it is necessary"*.

On the contrary, someone who has not been consulted, does not feel engaged in the decision: *"Those who have not been consulted feel neither concerned nor implicated in the decision"*. Or: *"If a decision is made for which we have not been consulted, we can go our own way"*.

Simply by attending the meetings and being consulted, an individual is engaged in the decision. Viewed from this angle, consultation and decision are strongly connected.

Finally, considering only the decisional substance and the trajectory followed by viewpoints during the process, a "missing link" is revealed. During consultation, an opinion is respected as a person's word. It is not to be discussed, criticized or debated. Then, the group begins to search a common direction . At this point, debating or confronting viewpoints are not welcome because they act as divergent in a group in search of federation. They may hindered the creativity which is needed at this step of the process. *"In a compromise culture, it is crucial to take an active part in the collective creation of thoughts and ideas"*.

A key issue at this stage of the process is that initial opinions progressively lose their individual character and merge into a collective position. Consequently, they can no more be defended accordingly. In fact, the whole process excludes the possibility for an individual to defend his viewpoint as such.

Dutch decision process corresponds to an engagement of a person to the decision, independently of that of her ideas.

5-4 Passive tolerance (Gedogen) as an expression of the "shallowness" of the connection

Dutch decision rely on a primacy of collective over individual interests and it is interpreted by the actors in such a way. However, in reality, an individual often has the occasion to turn the decision to his advantage, negotiate his position or even sell his voice. This deviation from collective interest towards an individual profit is "tolerated" (ten Hooven, 2002). "Gedogen" is another non translatable term which reflect this acceptance to a deviation of a rule, a norm or a law.

When analysed in details, passive tolerance is a consequence of this shallow connection between the individual and the group. The Dutch society considers that the respect of

rules is under a joined responsibility of authorities and citizens (Van Oenen, 2002). Consequently, laws, rules and norms are not totally determined but allow some degree of individual interpretation. This freedom of interpretation is accompanied by an expectation of an exemplar attitude towards the rule. but as an expectation cannot stand for an obligation, a deviant attitude cannot be forbidden: it has to be tolerated. Gedogen appears as a direct consequence of this shallow connection between individual autonomy and cooperation.

6- The articulation between individual autonomy and cooperation in Dutch consensus

6-1 Insider's perception

Two independent register

Consensual decision is interpreted by its actors as a collective situation with an individual step. During consultation, the group draws back and give the floor to individual expressions. During decision, the individual draws back and give the floor to the group. Individual autonomy and cooperation express exclusively and make a switch. They avoid each other and this avoidance solves the question of their coexistence.

The construction of consensus is based on an independence of two symbolic registers (consultation and decision) and assisted by a series of social devices. These social devices operate in concert by decoupling consultation and decision, by limiting the overlap between individual positions and collective decision or by neutralizing a potential conflict between them. Dutch decision process requires these avoidances and separations for a proper functioning.

The individual, the group and their articulation in Dutch consensus

Dutch consensus operates a distinction between an individual self and a collective self. This confers to the individual a safe position in the group. The group protect the individual in exchange of his adhesion and the individual has to settle up for himself exclusively. He sits in a "low stake low risk" position towards the group.

Taken from the perspective of the individual, this position is much more risky . In case of disagreement between the individual and the group, the resulting tension is not bared by the group, neither is it shared by the individual and the group. The tension is rejected on the individual and interiorised. It is up to him to manage the contradiction between his individual and collective self with the assistance of the famous social devices. This rejection of the tension on individual is far from neutral in term of ethics as it may damage the integrity of the individual as well as that of the group.

6-2 Outsider's perception

A French faces two kind of difficulties with the Dutch decision process. One concerns the decision itself and its substance. The other concerns the perception of the individual and his position within the group .

The quality of the decision

Dutch decision is not the result of sampling potential solutions but the construction of a solution. Once a final decision is reached, possible alternatives are not evaluated. A French would rather evaluate several potential scenarios and retain the one who appears as the best efficient.

Consensual decision is a solution suitable for most actors and not the best solution. A French endures difficulties with what he calls “soft compromises”. The substance of the decision is so important for him that he dares to change a decision that proves unsatisfactory. This right to change the decision is probably the biggest intercultural obstacle between Dutch and French. In Dutch eyes, a change in a decision denies the agreement between peers.

The defence of the individual

The fact of giving an opinion and then, consent to a different decision without defending one’s viewpoint embarrasses a French. It gives him a feeling of opportunism. Because he has had a chance to fight for his position, a French keeps his integrity when it comes to a different decision. Along the same line, the demand for emotional control and objectivity can restrict someone’s integrity.

In the French culture, the respect of an individual is closely associated to that of his ideas. One has the right to defend own positions and to convince the peers. “Leaving someone with own values” is rather seen a lack of interest and implication.

The relation between the individual and the group

The Dutch decision process requires an engagement of the participants in the future decision. Viewed from a French eye, this engagement of an individual towards the group without knowing the substance of the future decision does not seem reasonable. This is perceived as losing his grip on the issue. In the French situation, an individual is not under the protection of the group and he is asked to legitimate his viewpoint in front of the group. This “high stake, high risk” position towards the group, gives him more room for his individual integrity.

6-3 Cultural variation: what is at stake?

The relevance of pre-settled categories?

It is amazing to consider the gap between ethnographical and cross-cultural studies. Indeed the choice between these approaches reflects the dilemma between “the broad and the deep” (Chapman, 1997), but there is more than that at stake. In several cases, cross-cultural studies prove limited in describing a country. For example, a model of coexistence between individualism and collectivism has been proposed in the case of India (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994) and China (Ho & Chiu, 1994; Katgicibaci, 1994, 1997; Gudykunst, 1998). Some nations do not recognize themselves as individualist only, or collectivist only (Maznevski et al., 2002).

To which extent is it relevant to dissociate the individual and the group? Does it make sense to consider an individual deprived from social interactions or a group detached from its individuals? Is it possible to ignore the permanent movement between

assimilation and differentiation and the tension between conformity and autonomy? Indeed this aspect is difficult to approach experimentally because it requires research methods that can spot the articulation between cohesive and scattering elements.

Individualism and collectivism: what is at stake ?

As soon as an inductive pathway that aims at uncovering indigenous categories is undertaken, individual autonomy and cooperation between peers do not appear as universal. More than that, a factor can be considered as individual in one culture and as collective in another. For example, this research indicates that opinions and thoughts are highly individual in Dutch culture whereas they have a collective character in the French culture. It is the very nature of the uncovered indigenous categories and their combinations that emerges as a crucial issue in cultural variation and not their intensity.

This study has tried to clarify the mechanism by which individual autonomy and cooperation coexist in Dutch consensus. This situation associates a specific type of individual autonomy (in thoughts) and a specific type of cooperation (for pragmatic achievement). A “conciliation” of these factor is achieved by means of a sophisticated mechanism of mutual avoidance assisted by a series of social devices.

Each culture has its specific way to handle the contradictions and difficult issues inherent in a society. Each culture design an “home made” partition of the reality into categories in order to reduce the tension associated with these issues. All this machinery that involves sophisticated mechanism and assisting social devices sit at the core of cultural variation.

Potentialities of ethnographic studies

Ethnography is hampered by a lack of theoretical frame that could federate a collection of ill-assorted studies. Indeed, considering that each culture is auto-centred, there are no standard categories. A research which aims at uncovering specific aspects deserves some freedom and serendipity. However, one can prepare the ground and design a loose grid which read a social situation by crossing the register of the persons and the register of their actions. This grid is organized along two broad and flexible directions. The first direction bring together factors related to the individual and group. This direction aims at understanding the mechanism by which the individual and the group are interconnected. The second direction brings together the persons (individuals or groups) and the things. It aims at characterizing the situations in which an equivalence between people and things is achieved. More specifically, this direction target the locus of equivalence between people and things and their interconnections. This grid has proved very useful to uncover the symbolic categories at stake in Dutch consensus and could be extended to other studies.

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